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ABSTRACT

The efforts of the foreign languages department at the College of St. Thomas to introduce a new major in international business illustrate the psychological barriers to innovation. Neither the college's business department nor the local multinational corporations took international business very seriously, and the new endeavor was received with condescension. Increasing global competition gradually made the concept of an international business major more attractive within the college and within the state, making possible the addition of a master's program in international business. While the program has been successful, its language segment is still not viewed as an integral or necessary part of the program by some employers and faculty. Even traditional language faculty do not always accept business language instruction as important, and this remains the most difficult barrier to overcome. Business language faculty must show professionalism, commitment, and productivity in both teaching and research, and support their colleagues in both traditional literature instruction and in business language in order to establish the legitimacy of the field. (MSE)

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THE BUSINESS LANGUAGE TEACHER: THE PROBLEM OF BEING TAKEN SERIOUSLY

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PAUL A. SCHONS

The Department of Foreign Languages at the College of St. Thomas introduced a new major in international business approximately 10 years ago. Our approaches to the department of business seeking cooperation encountered polite though somewhat condescending reactions. The BA department had no objection to our developing such a major, but made it clear that they did not wish to become directly involved. After all they already had important things to do. They did specify that they would prefer that the major not be called an international business major but rather a language major with a concentration in business. Limited in this way, they regarded our attempts as harmless--not to be taken very seriously.

At that time there were of course several multinational corporate headquarters in Minneapolis/St. Paul--3M, Honeywell, H.B. Fuller, Pillsbury, Tennant, Control Data, to name a few. But in effect the multinationals did not yet take international business very seriously. Our approaches to business tended to receive the same polite but

condescending welcome we had experienced in our approaches to our own business department. This was partly because we were, of course, only foreign language teachers rather than business teachers. Partly it was, however, because the older tradition of seeing the international market as only a supplement to the serious market--the domestic market--still had its many adherents. Everyone knew that English is the language of business--and at that time that meant in many minds that all business world wide is carried out in English and of course in the correct fashion: The American Way.

All of these attitudes began to change, however, as it became more clear that there was suddenly some very serious competition elsewhere on the planet, more importantly, that foreign businesses were beginning to operate on the basis of global strategies, and worse, were harvesting noticeable market shares in our domestic market. American business began to be aware that it would have to globalize its strategies to remain competitive, not only internationally but even in the domestic market. Suddenly academic business departments began to feel pressure to add international components to the curriculum.

In our case the result was that the concept of an international business major suddenly became attractive to our business department. It is rather clear that if the department of foreign languages had not already had a program

in place, the department of business would not have made a vigorous attempt to include a language segment in the international business major they now wanted. As it was, the program was in place and common planning led to a two track major in international business--one with a primary concentration in business and one with a primary concentration in a foreign language. This dual track international business major has now been in place for five years. The business concentration requires 6 courses in a foreign language. The language concentration requires 8 courses in business and economics. Both insist at least a semester to be taken abroad.

Two years ago the continued sense of need on the part of American business to globalize, the vision of Governor Perpich of Minnesota in strongly supporting international educational programs, and plans for a Minnesota World trade center made it seem reasonable for us to add to our programs a masters program in international management as an option within our MBA program. From the undergraduate base the department of foreign languages played an active role in planning for the new masters program, which clarifies partly how the new program came to have a strong required component of Foreign language study.

The international masters program when it begins its third year of operation in Fall, 1986 will have an enrollment of

about 250 students. Nearly all are businesspersons who work full time during the day and take courses evenings and Saturdays. Of the fourteen required courses two are foreign language courses at the post intermediate level. To accommodate students with little or no previous language experience, the program offers non-credit intensive courses at the beginning and intermediate levels. The two required language courses required for graduation and offered for credit are an introduction to business concepts and practices and a course in current events of the target cultural area with, of course, an emphasis on business and economics. All presentations, discussions, readings, and tests in the two required credit courses are in the target language. Courses are currently available in French, German, Japanese and Spanish. By individual arrangement students are permitted to transfer equivalent courses in other languages into the program.

After some struggle over a ten year period, our foreign language instructors have become an integral part of international business programs in undergraduate and graduate programs. Foreign language teachers have for some time also taught language courses on site for multinational business in the area. Foreign language teachers have begun to accept assignments from multinational business as consultants on international matters on an individual basis and as a part of teams composed of language professors and business

professors. We are certainly taken more seriously than was the case ten years ago, but difficulties remain. We still encounter an occasional case in which an employer is willing to pay the cost of tuition for an employee in the masters program except for the cost of the language courses. Certain of the business professors in the MBA program are still perplexed at the presence of language teachers at MBA faculty meetings and more so to encounter language teachers on MBA decision making committees. Many of our colleagues still expect that the sole function of language teachers is to put endings on verbs, prepare vocabulary lists, possibly recite series of prepositions, and generally do whatever meaningless things they think language teachers do. Perhaps those in French might occasional sip a glass of wine with students and those in German guzzle some beer. Many still have no concept of the extent to which language and culture might affect business practices and success or failure except that as everyone knows, you never show the soles of your feet to the Buddha!

Integral though we language people may be to the program, we are not understood nor always taken very seriously. To many, language teachers are a part of a current fad in business and, hopefully, will soon pass away again. I would assume that those are the same persons who hope equally ardently that foreign competition and the whole troublesome business of globalization will also soon pass away. It is usually a

surprise of some magnitude to such persons that a language teacher might have some interest in or much more surprisingly, actually know something about business.

But, moving from their misconceptions to our own consideration of our own role, I should say that if we are planning to be involved in business programs for a while, and plan to be more than a part of a passing fad, we had full well better know something about business. And yet I fear that all-too-often this is an area in which we do not take ourselves very seriously.

It is self-delusion if we feel that language is language and that to prepare ourselves to become active in the teaching of business language we need only develop some additional vocabulary and essentially apply what we already know to a business situation.

We have learned that to assure students that if they learn the language well and focus on business vocabulary, they will surely find a job abroad, is deception. If such were the case, I speculate that there would be no unemployment in the world, for each country on the face of this globe has, in fact, a surplus of natives who speak the language very well indeed. Better even than our best students at graduation.

To find a position in and to be successful in an

international division our former students must be very good in management, marketing, engineering, accounting, or whatever their chosen specialization may be. The language will assist them but is clearly not their primary skill. There may well be a day when language skill may become a requisite for employment in international divisions of U. S. companies as it is in effect in many foreign companies, but it is clear that that day has not yet come. Further, even when such a day may come, the technical skills rather than the language skills will remain the applicants selling point.

In much the same way that we have learned on our way to professionalism in business language that students must not have inflated ideas of what language will do for them, so must we learn to cease deluding ourselves that the ability to teach business language is simply a matter of vocabulary devoid of knowledge of business practices and devoid of product interest. We must cease deluding ourselves that the teaching of business language is a matter of methodology rather than also a matter of growing sophistication in business and economics.

This perception makes the move to business language perhaps less attractive, for to develop such knowledge and understanding is a lengthy and difficult process.

For the most part we in languages have received our degrees

in literary criticism, linguistics, and perhaps pedagogy. At most universities a part of the humanities departmental culture has long been to learn to look down on business departments as less worthy and most likely teaching nothing of substance in comparison to our lofty endeavors. If we are to develop a profession in business language, we must learn to do away with whatever remnants of such elitism remain with us and learn to think of "getting our hands dirty" with practical studies as perhaps not dirty at all but rather an involved and critical study. We must learn to appreciate the complexity and intellectual attractiveness of the investigation of commercial development. (In retrospect it seems strange indeed that in traditional language teaching, we have thought we were teaching all the essential elements of a culture while blissfully ignoring the economic aspects of that culture. In this respect I am convinced that developing expertise in business and economics will add a very important component to traditional civilization and culture courses.)

becoming truly professional in the field of business language will involve for most of us rather a great deal of development and retraining. We should be taking seminars in our countries of focus involving business and economics. We should be taking courses at our home universities in business and also learning American business practice, for the successful teaching of foreign business practices involves

us in comparing to American structures. In the same way that traditional language teaching has always involved teaching a great deal of English to our students to enable them to understand the workings of the foreign language, teaching business language involves us in the necessity of teaching a great deal of business. (The way out many of us have probably used on occasionjwhen confronted with a technical question, "I am a language teacher, not a business teacher." is simply not acceptable if we are to take ourselves seriously as a profession, if we are to be taken seriously by our students, and if we are to be taken seriously by the business community we wish to serve.)

We should be attending business conferences rather than limiting ourselves to only those professional conferences such as this one intended primarily for language teachers. At conferences such as this one, we should be insistent on large numbers of business content presentations rather than only presentations on methodology, program reports, and teaching materials. (I am delighted, by the way that this conference seems year by year to be tending more in that direction.)

We should be seeking ways to gain some business experience, preferably abroad or in international divisions but also in domestic situations. Our students and our colleagues will tend to take us more seriously if we have direct experience

in business situations and can relate our teaching to on the job experience. (I blush to remember how in my own first attempts to teach business German what strange perceptions I had of what might go on in an office either here or in Germany.)

Rather than limiting our experience to business language textbooks from which we might teach, we should be reading the important business magazines and newspapers in our language/ cultural area. The difficulty with textbooks in this field is that they outdate so very quickly and of course they are redimentary. It strikes me as impossible to offer a dynamic business course without making frequent reference to day to day events as they develop in
the cultural area in which we are teaching.

In our hiring, we should consider for some of our positions in business language, those who had trained for teaching but for one reason or another went into business. Because of salary differences such people are frequently unwilling to return to academia on a permanent basis but frequently are pleased to take on positions on a part time basis. The presence of people with such a background is useful to a developing department not only through the experience they themselves bring to the classroom but also through their sharing of information with traditionally educated and experienced colleagues who are attempting to develop skills

in business language.

In the face of such suggestions many may protest that our function is that of language teacher--not business teacher. I counter that that is incorrect. Language is not an abstraction--especially not in the business language classroom. It is communication within a body of knowledge. At a time when literature was the exclusive vehicle of language teaching, it was generally agreed that the language teacher should know something about literature. In a new profession in which business is the vehicle of language teaching we should expect ourselves to know something about business.

If we take ourselves seriously in developing a profession, and one which is more than a temporary fad, we should begin to give some thought to a doctoral program which will train with business and economics as a vehicle in the same way that the traditional PhD has trained with literature as a vehicle.

At least until such a degree may have come into existence, we face yet another group which does not take business language teachers very seriously: our colleagues in languages. As I implied earlier there is an ingrained culture in humanities departments which teaches PhD candidates to regard business studies with disdain. Our experienced colleagues and the young greenhorns coming into the profession, although often

at odds on so many issues, seem at least to be of one mind in regard to this important point of prejudice. It is sometimes a question which is more difficult to bear, the distance from which business professors look down upon us as language teachers or the distance from which language teachers look down upon us as having "sold out" to pragmatic interests.

This lack of understanding from our language colleagues has negative impact on our ability to build a business language program. In our experience at St. Thomas student response has been consistently very strong as it has been also at other institutions and resulted in the program's growing quite rapidly. The problem in this is twofold. It is difficult to identify persons experienced in business language to recruit and it is also difficult to attract traditionally trained teachers willing to learn to do business language.

As Chair of the language department I have found the process of conversion to be difficult and lengthy. The teacher must first be convinced that there is no canceling effect in teaching business language on one's appreciation of literature and culture. It is actually still possible to teach a course in literature once again after one has been "tainted" by contact with business concepts. The truth of the matter is that one may by this contact be a better teacher of literature having broadened one's scope and

developed a more universal understanding of a foreign culture.

Even after the initial tolerance has been reached, problems remain. The first reaction of the teacher new to the area is to move to the conclusion that one can simply teach traditional civilization and culture courses with a bit of added business vocabulary and a few business anecdotes. There remains usually a continuing reluctance to undertake serious new learning in the field. There remains a sense of selling out if one goes so far as to actually develop a fully new course devoted to business. In fairness, the next step does involve a bit of a risk. In the area of business language there is a sufficient amount to learn that the required amount of learning for excellent teaching in the area does detract from the amount of time one might devote to research in one's original field. Serious longer term work in business language does thus in fact impair one's ability to continue serious work in the traditional fields. Further, since the field is so very dynamic and changing, a serious commitment to the field requires an ever increasing time commitment to remain current.

Assuming one does make the commitment to develop expertise in business language and does make the time commitment, there remains a further problem group which tends not to take the field of business language seriously: the departmental rank

and tenure committee. Such committees tend to be populated by elder and more traditionalist faculty who at best fail to regard business language as a serious and/or significant area of endeavor. At worst they may regard this specialty as a threat. Indeed if the number of tenure slots is limited and the department has not yet tenured its late medieval lyric specialist, the upcoming business language teacher is a serious threat. The large business language class seems further a direct threat to the professor who may face diminishing numbers in the Eighteenth Century literature class.

Finally we come to the point where we may be concerned about someone taking us too seriously!!

The problems we face are essentially the problems any new field encounters. The inertia of tradition is difficult to overcome. Yet it must be moved if there is to be progress and development. The responsibility for the required effort lies with the practitioners.

Of the various problems we face, I should say that of the three areas addressed here--acceptance by business, retraining ourselves, and acceptance by our colleagues in language instruction--the last should be for the moment our most critical area of concern. Business has recognized the need for globalization and in that connection has begun to

recognize the need for training in language and culture. This recognition has not yet gone as far as we should like to see, but the market is established. Assuming that language and cultural knowledge is an addendum to a corporation's competitive position, that fact will continue to develop the market to its ultimate demand. This is not to say that we should not continue to be active in nurturing attitudes and recognitions toward greater maturity. That effort must continue. But I doubt that that area any longer need be our prime concern. Although the often condescending attitude of our professional colleagues in business may be distressing it is not a serious threat to our own work. Unlike our colleagues in humanities, business teachers tend to react rather more quickly to the current needs of the day, and as business increasingly demonstrates the need for people with backgrounds in language and culture the academic profession will react.

Business language is taken seriously by students as is clear from the rapid growth of business language courses and programs nationwide and the increasing number of students enrolled. One hears that current student interests are often a reliable predictor of future trends--in this case we hope that is true! Beyond hoping, however there seems to be in this development a factor of self realization. As the number of business students graduated with language skills increases, it becomes easier for corporations to add such

skills to their international departments and a new essential element of competitive advantage is added to the job market. In effect the market begins to feed on itself--at this stage, availability leads to increasing demand. Further as young people with increased international interests and expertise move up within corporations, the international sophistication of the corporation increases and with it grows the further demand for persons with equal and greater ability.

Toward the realization of these ends it is critically important that the students we are training have sufficient skills for the corporations to take seriously. As mentioned earlier it is very important that students be credible not only in language but also in business skills. Their language credibility must further have the characteristic of being applicable to the business situation. Traditional training in grammar and literature is not sufficient. The traditional training of teachers in these areas is also not sufficient. To achieve the ends we desire, it is essential that we take ourselves seriously as business language teachers and develop the knowledge and skills needed for excellent teaching as has been outlined earlier. This area too is obviously essential to the growth of a profession. This is demanding of our time and energy, but I would maintain still not the most difficult problem facing us today.

The most difficult problem is our colleagues in language. In

the humanities change has traditionally come about very slowly. The job market for language teachers has for some time been quite difficult. This factor works to the advantage of our interest in developing a new field, for teachers are much more willing to consider new skill development if it will assist in entry into an academic department. Student demand for such people is present, but our traditionalist colleagues never the less seem often quite reluctant to allow this new direction into the department. When business language people are brought into the department they are often made to feel as second class citizens--tolerated for a momentary need, but certainly not making serious contribution to the field. These difficulties, though unpleasant, can be tolerated. What can not be tolerated is the refusal of departments to tenure business language professors. This roadblock more than any other could strangle the young profession.

This is for the moment the greatest problem we face. We must be sure in our own minds that business language speaks to a long term need--that is, once again, we must take ourselves seriously. We must demonstrate professionalism to our colleagues through the very self confidence and productivity they may deny is to be found in this field. That productivity must take the form not only of excellence in teaching but also of critical research and generation of new knowledge. As we expect tolerance from literature and

linguistics specialists, we must show respect for and continued interest in those areas. We must support our colleagues work in their own areas; in this way we can perhaps begin to overcome the sense of threat that the popularity of business language courses may arouse. We must speak with one and other. We must support each other's efforts. We veterans must certainly support the self development and progress toward tenure of younger scholars in the field of business language.

As women have long known in their attempts to be taken seriously in academia, we all, in this new field, must take the same difficult route. To be equal, we must be better. The potential of this field would seem to justify the effort. Let us take the challenge seriously in all of its ramifications.